

CHAPTER THREE

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE FUNCTION OF HUMILITY

The Idealism that Elkin learned from Francis Anderson complemented Anglican Catholicism, but also subverted it: Elkin did not credit his Church's exclusive truth claims. He found the practical business of ministry dispiriting, until he saw anew through the eyes of Christian anthropologists how religion uniquely ministered to the whole personality. Developments in anthropology, functional psychology, and sociology provided a scholarly rationale for his practical and ritual work as a priest. From the writings on primitive religion by R. R. Marett and William Robertson Smith, Elkin gleaned a vision of religion that exceeded, but still supported, his Anglican ministry. In the Masters of Arts thesis he wrote for Anderson, Elkin synthesised the work of Marett and Robertson Smith. Their common premise was that throughout history, in a horse-shoe continuum from totemism to non-dogmatic Christianity, corporate religion had yielded humility, reverence, communion, courage, and goodness.

The new perspective brought problems of its own. It came uncomfortably close to that of the post-religious sociologist, Emile Durkheim – a contemporary and interlocutor of Marett's, who had also been influenced by Robertson Smith. In concluding the thesis, Elkin attempted to answer Durkheim by implying a kind of agency in vital processes, which demanded a basic attitude of humility. But this solution created another problem: Elkin weakened Christianity's traditional emphasis upon humility in interpersonal relations, and recast religious submission as an evolutionary technique for fitting society to its environment. This evolutionary idea enabled him quietly to harbour religious vitalism and a unique interpretation of the Nietzschean arguments made by the diffusionist ethnological school in which he completed his PhD (Ch. 4). Ironically, despite inverting Nietzsche's valuation of 'the Priests', for several years Elkin edged towards a vitalist amorality closer to the 'death of God' than the resurrection of Christ.

In this chapter, we again look at Elkin's struggles with the relation between faith and dogma. Having laid out last chapter the underlying tension between Anglicanism and Idealism, and having placed it in the context of childhood and religious socialisation, we will now focus upon Elkin's spiritual and intellectual struggles in his early manhood, when he

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

discovered that he could marry a vocation as an anthropologist with his religious commitment.

An Anglican Road to Anthropology

While still at university, Elkin struggled under the burden of Christian claims to literal, supernatural truth. Elkin's biographer has written that when Anderson required Elkin to study Kant's exposition of the fallacy of the 'three-fold proof of God's existence', the ordinand suffered nervous illnesses that marred his last undergraduate year.¹ Upon graduating in 1915, Elkin declined to join the majority of graduates who enlisted to serve in the Great War. He asked Bishop Stretch if his appointment to the clergy could wait until he had completed a Diploma of Divinity – and worked through his doubts.² Stretch had recently farewelled his son, bound for the trenches. Perhaps with that perspective in mind, Elkin accepted Stretch's reassurance that he was ready for clerical responsibility. Elkin served briefly at Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle – as Assistant Curate and as Deacon. He read the Christian Socialists, and initiated youth work projects. On 17 March 1916, he was already priested.

Non-dogmatic religion was hard to sustain. A generation earlier, Anderson had helped the Rev. Charles Strong found in Melbourne the 'Australian Church', an attempt at a new denomination, free of all literalism.³ It was short-lived. Elkin had different problems: the massive, if slowing, momentum of Anglicanism provided him with parishioners, but also with the problems of conscience Anderson had tried to avoid in his youth, and had highlighted in his philosophy lectures. Elkin taught Anderson's historical appreciation of Christian faith. He told his congregation that the Apostles' Creed was a record of what 'these simple men *died for* in the second century AD.' It was what they knew and acted on; 'a record of the faith they lived by'.⁴ The Creed had historical substance, and so (he implied) the question of its truth could be waived.

It was not a happy time for Elkin. Within weeks of being priested, he was bed-ridden again, and within three months had retired from Christ Church 'due to persistent ill-health.'⁵

¹ Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 19–21.

² *Ibid.*, 20.

³ *The Australian Church, Report 1887 and sermons preached by Rev Chas Strong, D. D. and Rev Francis Anderson, M. A.*, NLA.

⁴ Third sermon, first sermon book, p. 5. EP 5/3/13.

⁵ *Newcastle Diocesan Yearbook*, 1916; cited in Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 22.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

After a break, Stretch assigned him to an ‘easy’ post: Gundy, northwest of the Hunter Valley. It was a far-flung, lightly peopled Parish. Elkin averaged ten nights at home a month, and rode about 4000 miles each year on horseback. His reminiscences lingered on the travel, and omitted the ministry.⁶ At this stage, there was no sign of the enthusiasm for Christian ritual that had been a lifeline in his adolescence (Ch. 2), and that marked his sermons and other religious writings a decade later.⁷ In December 1917, he generalised from his own experience, advising the readers of the diocesan magazine (of which he was assistant editor) to make the best of ‘Our Road to God’:

For various reasons, generally because of birth, we find ourselves members of a particular church, that is, on a particular road to heaven. So what we must do is to go as hard as we can along our road, using all its sign posts, refreshing stations and means of transit and not leave it unless we come to what is to us a real hindrance, or find that it lacks something essential to our vocation.⁸

He advised a resigned conformity, but with a defiant subtext. Perhaps he expected that he would be leaving the Church soon: that the compromises he was making between intellectual conscience and corporate submission would intensify and so become a ‘real hindrance’. In the Andersonian ethos, scholarly Idealism must have seemed a higher and greater purpose than his present duties. But for now, he walked the Christian road.

Taking his own advice, he used the available ‘refreshing stations’. Within two months of publishing ‘Our Road to God’, he attended for six days the second Summer School at Wyong beach for Newcastle Diocese clergy. Within another two months, he had arranged a longer break from pastoral duties, in which he studied Aboriginal culture. Thus began the academic speciality that set him on his road to the professorship. As mentioned last chapter, Elkin made this turn after Ernest Burgmann alerted him to the possibility of spiritual illumination to be gained from recent developments in anthropology.

⁶ AP Elkin, *The Diocese of Newcastle* (Sydney: Australian Medical Publishing Company, 1955), 416.

⁷ *Idem*, First address to Morpeth congregation: paginated manuscript, July 1929, EP 5/3/3 *Christian Ritual* (Morpeth: Morpeth Booklet 8, 1933).

⁸ ‘Our Road to God’, *Newcastle Diocesan churchman*, December 1917. cited Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 21. The substance and phrasing both suggest that Elkin was already reading William Robertson Smith, probably via Francis Anderson – another Scot, with almost identical theology, and a particular interest in sociology. See William Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (1889; London: Adam and Charles Black, 1907), 28–30.

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

Indeed, Burgmann had initiated the summer schools Elkin attended. Burgmann modelled them on an English retreat he had attended in 1915. The idea was to bring clergy together to inspire one another with new avenues for spiritual development. Upon his return to Australia in 1916, he organised a ‘School’ open to all Anglicans, but finding too many papers ‘boring’, he decided to restrict the next to the Diocese of Newcastle.⁹ The Diocese prided itself on the broad enquiry and robust debate that accompanied the traditionally rational tenor of High Church Anglicanism.¹⁰ In a photo of the thirty clergymen who in February 1917 comprised the first School, Elkin and Burgmann squared off, hands gloved, about to box. In intellectual matters, too, Elkin was one of the keener responders to Burgmann’s invitation to spar.

In February 1918, events suggest, Elkin warmed to Burgmann’s latest enthusiasm: the Melanesian Mission. Burgmann had spent the preceding year travelling the state, raising money for the Australian Board of Missions (ABM). Burgmann’s interest in the work probably originated in 1914, aboard ship on the way to England, through the friendship he developed with Walter Durrad, a young member of the Melanesian Mission.¹¹ The founders of the Mission were famous for their unique insistence on training indigenous scholars in a college setting, and returning them to their islands to build indigenous churches (see Ch. 6). Probably this venture sparked Burgmann’s interest: already, he too had begun training ordinands. Bishop Stretch hoped that this responsibility was the first step towards Burgmann one day founding a seminary that would educate ordinands in ‘true learning and sound religion’ (as against the Evangelist literalism that graduates of Moore College, Sydney ingested.)¹² The resolve of the Melanesian Mission to foster unique local churches through the gradual work of scholarship – the Mission founders believed enthusiastic conversion was a damaging distraction (Ch. 6) – became a key reference point for Burgmann in his deputations for the ABM.¹³

The best story in Burgmann’s repertoire on the hustings for the ABM was the martyrdom of John Patteson, second Bishop of Melanesia, and leader of the Mission. Later

⁹ For Burgmann’s response, see Records of the Anglican Church, Diocese of Newcastle, University of Newcastle Arcives (RACN), A5350; cited in Hempenstall, *The Meddlesome Priest*, 79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹¹ Burgmann sustained his friendship with Durrad, who in the late 1920s contributed to the *Morpeth Review*.

¹² Hempenstall, *The Meddlesome Priest*, 49–50.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 83–86.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

(Ch. 6), we will address the significance of Patteson's career and martyrdom in the development of both pure and applied anthropology. Now, the relevant point is that Patteson's right hand man and for fifteen years the Headmaster of the Mission school, Robert Codrington, had published a seminal anthropological work.¹⁴ He demonstrated that throughout Melanesia, primitive men shared a concept of supernatural power – 'mana' – which found its characteristic object in awesome natural events, but also in extraordinary human prowess. As a Christian, Codrington had not been surprised to conclude from his knowledge of various Melanesian peoples that man had an original, universal religious sense. But his conclusion came from data and insights that were compelling for non-believers, such as Dr. W. H. R. Rivers, also. Codrington put a new ideal of a universal religious impulse into the centre of British social anthropology.¹⁵ Evidently, Elkin was interested in the anthropological aspect of Burgmann's championship of the Mission. Two months after the summer school, he had taken leave from Gundy, for another of the Anglican Church's 'refreshing stations' where he was able to study Australian anthropology first-hand.

Elkin recuperated with a Catholic order within the Anglican Church: the Bush Brothers. Stretch announced to Synod that the loneliness and distance of Elkin's work at Gundy had taken their toll.¹⁶ In April 1918, Elkin shared a buggy with Brother John Consterdine, travelling between settlements in the desert around Bourke, far western New South Wales. 'Brother Connie' was a graduate, Bachelor of Arts, and a student of Aboriginal archaeology, who had published accounts of his findings. He showed Elkin his collection of stone tools and burial icons, fresh relics from a pre-historic material culture. But Elkin's imagination ran fastest along different lines.

Primitive religion had fascinated Elkin at University. At Chapel in College, he heard regular reminders of the Catholic Anglican emphasis upon continuity with the Church Fathers – those outsiders of ancient Rome. In the lecture hall, Francis Anderson had also, for different reasons, emphasized the need to understand how different were the minds of the people Jesus taught. As we will soon see, classics scholars, notably James Frazer, had begun to realise that these ancients were closer to the 'savage' mind than had been supposed. Anderson introduced

¹⁴ Robert Codrington, *The Melanesians: Studies in their Anthropology and Folk-lore*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891).

¹⁵ George W. Stocking, Jr., *After Tylor* (London: Athlone, 1995), 46.

¹⁶ *Newcastle diocesan yearbook*, 1918; cited in Wise, *Self-made Anthropologist*, 24.

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

his Honours students to the revolution in sociology being wrought by the writers of *l'Anée Sociologique*, led by Emile Durkheim, who enquired into pre-historical religious experience.¹⁷ Elkin's sense of this intellectual excitement was probably sharpened by Burgmann's stories about Patteson and Codrington, and must have peaked as he travelled in Brother Connie's buggy. How recently had Aborigines placed these burial stones? What did they mean? Were they evidence that Aborigines also knew Codrington's pre-historic form of a universal religious experience? Elkin set to reading.

He formed a new attitude to the relation between intellectual scruples and religious continuity. His outlook arose from a dense set of intellectual precedents. We will spend most of this chapter separating out their influence upon him. An Anglican scholar's development of the idea of *mana* was the first anthropological argument to affect Elkin; it also had the most enduring influence upon him.

The foremost treatment of Codrington's concept of *mana* was by R. R. Marett, Reader in Social Anthropology at Oxford. Marett had explored the implications of *mana* mainly with reference to the Australian Aborigines.¹⁸ And to complete the correspondence with Elkin's interests, Marett was a subtle apologist for a broad, agnostic Christianity. (In 1928, he became Rector of Exeter College.) In an argument against James Frazer's portrayal of religion as failed science, Marett proposed an alternative model of the moment at which a primitive man discovered religion.¹⁹ The hypothetical innovator did not suddenly try out the idea that a god existed. He experimented with the sensations of fear and weakness that followed from his biological heritage of expanding consciousness. Untroubled by the idea of paradox, he discovered that through an attitude of humility, he could transform impotence into courage and faith. The centrality of humility to religious experience was a central theme of Marett's and also Durkheim's response to the Aboriginal ethnography. As we will see, Elkin read both writers closely, and sought to reconcile the points at which they diverged.

¹⁷ Information taken from lists of texts that appear to be reading lists for various courses. P.027, Box 1, Anderson Papers, University of Sydney Archives. In the year Elkin began his Arts degree, Durkheim developed their idea of a *conscience collective* by examining its 'elementary forms' in Australian totemism – and hazarding a compelling theory about the origins of human thought itself. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1915).

¹⁸ RR Marett, *The Threshold of Religion* (1909 enlarged 1914; 4th ed., London: Methuen, 1929), *passim*; especially 'The Conception of Mana', 99–121.

¹⁹ *Idem*, 'From Spell to Prayer', 29–72.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

Ambition inverted

A switch in tone in Elkin's religious writings suggests that he was immediately influenced by Marett's argument from awe and humility. Later in 1918, when Elkin returned from Bourke to the Priesthood, the theme of humility peppered his sermons like a continual penance. 'If God had bidden us do some larger things,' Elkin told his congregation, 'we would have: philosophical theory, science *But...* [instead we] come to a service ... pray, confess our sins – children could do it.'²⁰ He was a little impatient, but chastened. Elkin's sermon notes continue: 'There is but *one* condition for receiving power from God: Humility, Littleness = Readiness to be little, to do easy things to receive God's gifts as He in His wisdom chooses.' In a different sermon from the same period, Elkin spoke of how the creator was 'not too proud to do little things; make the worm, jelly-fish, electrons.'²¹ Whether or not the message came via Marett, Elkin's defiant tone in 'Our Road to God' had submerged in his determination to learn humility.

Absorbed in his struggle between intellect and faith, ambition and immediate duty, Elkin seems not to have differentiated his own concerns from those of his congregation. Late in 1919, after just eight months as priest at his first difficult parish, Wallsend in the Hunter Valley, Burgmann invited Elkin to be Vice-Warden of St John's Theological College at Armidale, to share the teaching load. Elkin wanted to go but was unsure where his duty lay. That Sunday, he asked his congregation of families 'what would be your answer to a call to special work?' Presumably, they were non-plussed. He answered the question by assuring them that 'You will respond if you have seen the light.'²² It seems unlikely that his concern with 'a call to special work' derived from a disinterested consideration of his congregation's needs.

Sociologists and historians who study 'the [generally male] intellectual' have observed his tendency to project his sense of placelessness or alienation onto the audiences he purports to guide. By externalising his lack of fit with his society, he obtains a sense of power

²⁰ Third book of sermons, dated by a reference to the war; EP 5/3/13, p. 1. Emphasis in the original.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²² Elkin's sermon notes cited in Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 31.

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

over the problem while escaping its personal dimension, the theory goes.²³ Or, to use a spatial metaphor, he remains on the outside of society, and projects onto others the task of achieving a state of affairs that would put them all on the inside. Historians have identified this sort of projection in the humanitarian strand in Aboriginal affairs.²⁴ Humanitarians such as the anthropologist Donald Thomson identified with the injustice suffered by Aborigines. Thomson championed the Aborigine precisely because he perceived them as, like himself, wronged innocents.²⁵ He had less interest in a capable, adaptive model of Aboriginality, than in a utopia, wherein Aborigines would be able to persist as they had before the white invasion.

Elkin trained as a public moralist at the pulpit. He projected his young-intellectual sense of exile onto a small group of people, each of whom he knew. There, he attempted to model the Christian practice of repentance, and of the continual return in humility to one's sense of a greater will. In his first three years of ministry, his problem seems to have been that his self-examination yielded little other than conflict between his sense of obligation to the Church, his conscience, and his ambition. A Christian school of anthropology wrought a change.

Again, Burgmann was instrumental. Having pointed Elkin along the path of primitive religion, Burgmann now provided him with the opportunity to develop his new interest into a

²³ The problem of intellectuals' self-projection disguised as altruism is common to analyses of intellectuals in various traditions. See, for example, Judith Brett, 'The Tasks of Political Biography', in *idem* (ed.), *Political Lives* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997), 1–15, at 12: men who strive for power seek 'to overcome estimates of the self which they regard as inappropriately low'; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780 - 1950*, (Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1961), especially 178–79; Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, 1962 (London: Polity Press, 1989), 174–178; Jeremy Jennings (ed.), *Intellectuals in Twentieth Century France* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993); and Leon Fink, Leon Fink, *Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997). Bourdieu has made the most systematic attempt to reconcile the problem that claims of altruism pose to analyses that presume all acts are interested. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998) especially chapter four, 'Is a Disinterested Act Possible?' 75–91.

²⁴ Hasluck, *Black Australians*; Rowley II 1971, 448; Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003) Henry Reynolds makes the same point about mainly nineteenth century sympathisers with Aborigines in *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (1998). Attwood enquired into the psychological characteristics that prompted people to become activists for Aboriginal advance, whereas Reynolds emphasized the societal taboos directed against his subjects because they had questioned the morality of dispossession. Keith Windschuttle inverted Reynolds' point: Windschuttle argued that the eccentricity and instability of publicists of British injustice indicated that they were unreliable sources of information. See Windschuttle, 'The Myths of Frontier Massacres in Australian History Part III: Massacre Stories and the Policy of Separatism', *Quadrant* December 2000, 6–20.

²⁵ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, 103–118, especially at 112.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

course for ordinands. In 1920, as Vice-Warden at St John's Theological College in Armidale (Burgmann had not yet had the adjective removed from the name), Elkin taught Australia's first original course in 'The Early History of Man'.²⁶ In that course, Elkin combined his abiding interest in evolution, with his new readings in anthropology – indeed, 'he brought his anthropology into everything', one student recalled.²⁷ As we noticed last chapter, another student at St John's (a close friend of Burgmann's) recalled that Burgmann encouraged Elkin's anthropological studies – he 'drove Elkin on'. Burgmann had completed a Masters of Arts by correspondence with Anderson; it is reasonable to conclude that his friend's example or direct encouragement suggested the same path to Elkin.

Not that Elkin needed much encouraging. Aboriginal studies provided Elkin with a path into scholarship that linked his ministry with his intellectual drive. Freud, Frazer, Durkheim, Lange, Marett had all pored over the same first-hand accounts of Aboriginal religion, each enquiring into the origin and enduring nature of mind.²⁸ As he continued his readings, Elkin discovered that his doubt was no longer a source of personal anxiety and isolation within his Church; it was his window into the great intellectual dramas of the age.

For his Masters Thesis on Aboriginal religion, he drew together from a long list of sources the first Australia-wide synthesis of any aspect of Aboriginal life. The sources bore out Anderson (and Green's) doctrine that in religion, experience was fundamental, dogma an incidental historical and political accretion. But Elkin found something more powerful than mere compatibility between Anderson's Idealist milieu and the corporate strictures (such as they were) of Anglicanism. He discovered that Aborigines' religion modelled his own ideal relation with the Church, which he remembered was (or began to reconstrue as) a source of power. He did not project onto Aborigines his alienation from his society. Quite the reverse: he discovered in traditional Aboriginal religion a model of the way he and they were similarly bound into community.

²⁶ Wise, *Self-made Anthropologist*, 33.

²⁷ Edgar Cuttlife, pers. comm. to Wise, cited in *ibid.*

²⁸ *The Wingham chronicle and Manning River Observer* Friday 8 August 1924; *Voice of the North*, July 1924 reported Elkin's WEA lecture on the fame of the Aborigines in Europe's high culture.

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

The long view: from biblical criticism to the evolutionary paradigm

His anthropological readings provided Elkin with a long view of the significance of religious practice. The question that drove the nineteenth century revolution in biblical criticism had been: When were the books of the Bible written, who by, and how did the political and cultural context affect their meaning? Scholars exposed layers of myth, fiction, and error; and left no exceptional core. Then the question became: How do we make sense of culturally specific truth claims? Generally, the response to this question was: We unify them. Specifically, Radford's answer was that the Christian churches contained the closest impression of God's revelation – human and imperfect but containing traces of the Incarnate God – and in this, differed from the rest of humanity only – but decisively and finally – in degree. Anderson's answer was that those books were only one strand of a global spiritual intercourse that had culminated in the hope of human progress: the universal principle of personality. Each taught religion as a relation between groups of men and their God.

But now Elkin, part of a later generation of religious scholars, began to seek a still wider unity, between organic and non-organic creation. He studied Darwin before he studied biblical criticism; we recall that his first published paper was a review of *On the Origin of Species*. At the St John's seminary he taught theories of man's predecessor – not a 'missing link' to the apes, but a common ancestor from whom (or which) both descended. He was part of an Edwardian change in the temporal parameters of humanities scholarship that echoed the Victorians' change in the parameters of geology and evolution.²⁹ Edwardian humanities scholars ranged over tens of millennia, extending their grandfathers' historical purview by a factor of one thousand. A crucial question the Edwardians inherited from the late Victorians concerned the point at which the human soul emerged from the hominoids. The new religious inquiry was pre-historical: When did mammalian evolution give way to human history?

This new frame of enquiry extended, and did not replace, the Idealism of Elkin's undergraduate years. We need to pause to apprehend the breadth of scholarship he expected to master. He was at the late end of a generation of generalists, for whom Darwin's work was paradigmatic. Synoptic histories (Alfred Toynbee (jnr) was a contemporary) and ethnographies (Frazer's work was still being cited as current) were not reductive synopses, but the leading edge of scholarship. Francis Anderson taught philosophy, psychology,

²⁹ AN Wilson, *God's Funeral* (London: John Murray, 1999), 175–202.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

political economy, and sociology, and showed how two and a half millennia of human progress comprised one historical process. Now, reading anthropologists, Elkin corrected such narrowness of vision, in the service of the same synthetic project.

In true Idealist fashion, he introduced his thesis for a Masters of Arts by asserting that one's interest in origins made sense only as part of an inquiry into ends. The common concern of his European sources was a search for the origins of religion; but, he explained, it was 'really' a search for 'the end and "increasing purpose"' that we want to know, and which will act as a guide and incentive to our lives and history.'³⁰ Elkin wrote that the 'ultimate question' was whether purpose was metaphysical, an aspect of God.³¹ But he delimited his enquiry: it was strictly historical. He put aside the ultimate question, and aimed only 'to describe, externally, what religion is'. His idea was that religion had an abiding essence, observable and comparable, that simply 'was' for traditional, illiterate Aborigines and his own society. For Elkin, 'religion' meant a type of purpose, continuous across all human societies, and coterminous with human history. He extended back into evolutionary terms the Idealist assumption that purpose was continuous and unified.

But what sort of purpose was this? How did it differ from the amoral evolutionary principle, the survival of the fittest? Tennyson, in the passage from which Elkin quoted in his introduction to the thesis (the 'increasing purpose' quoted above), already in 1842 asked a version of this question. He figured science first as an 'Eye' that spoils order, and then as a predatory national spirit:

Eye, to which all order festers, all things here are out of joint,
Science moves, but slowly slowly, creeping on from point to point:

Slowly comes a hungry people, as a lion creeping nigher,
Glares at one that nods and winks behind a slowly-dying fire.

Yet I doubt not thro' the ages one increasing purpose runs,
And the thoughts of men are widen'd with the process of the suns.

³⁰ Elkin, 'Religion of the Australian Aborigines', 1. The phrase Elkin cited was from Tennyson's prophetic 'Locksley Hall', in which the poet rejected the allure of the noble savage, and anticipated the progressives' attempt to moralise their dominance in a 'Parliament of Man'. Tennyson asked the seminal Incarnationist, F. D. Maurice to be Godfather to his son.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

The leonine nation eats the pathetic figure (colonised man, and religious man), but the poet persists in his faith in history as the expansion of Mind. What sort of Mind was this?

Elkin followed his sources back to pre-history. In the conveniently speculative discourse concerning primitive man, Christian anthropologists were able to flesh out an idea of the ‘increasing purpose’ that they argued had been perverted by the time it was recorded. They believed that religion preserved its semblance. One of the earliest of these Christian scholars of the pre-history of the soul was William Robertson Smith. Robertson Smith wrote in the era of biblical criticism, when the emphasis was upon the historical contingency of all religious claims, and the basic question concerned the relation between the various religious claims made by different groups of people. Later Christian anthropologists, including Elkin and Marett, sought to reclaim his ideas within the evolutionary paradigm, that is, in terms of the relation between nature and God. This latter generation of Christian pre-historians had as their antagonist Emile Durkheim, whose structurally and functionally entire sociology expressly excluded the possibility that religious experience involved any power outside the individual and society. Just as God was excluded from matter, Durkheim banished Him also from Mind.³² For Christians, this was a problem. Could they salvage Robertson Smith’s discovery of a primitive and abiding ‘increasing purpose’?

Communion before property

Robertson Smith enquired into pre-historic Semitic religion against the background of his extensive study of Semitic peoples’ languages and history. Another resource he drew upon was his close friend James Frazer’s general knowledge of pre-historic primitive cultures. His purpose was to discover what he could of the nature of the traditional religion from which the ‘positive religions’ – that is, those developed from positive, distinguishing prophetic statements of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed – diverged. The importance of Robertson Smith’s work for Elkin’s enquiry was that in all fundamental respects, Elkin found that the totemism of the Aborigines proved that the ‘fundamental institutions’ Robertson Smith

³² Ernest Gellner, *Reason and Culture: The Historic Role of Rationality and Rationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), 30–53.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

discerned behind Semitic religion actually existed in Australia, and so probably were universal.

Robertson Smith's methodological innovation had been to view ritual as prior to belief. He could discover in the early books of the Bible no trace of an ancient creed and became satisfied there had been none. Prehistoric religion was ritual and experience, nothing more. Myths were illustrative, and incidental to the practical business of religious obligation and performance.³³

Robertson Smith had found that, originally, religion sustained societies by embodying and reinforcing their principles of inclusion – mainly kinship. The supernatural or divine world was an aspect of tribal existence; the individual's relation to it was secondary. In the long view, the religious question did not concern the individual's relation with his god or his fate, but the society's relation to its gods. His argument had met his personal needs: Robertson Smith was the ordained son of a Minister in the Free Church of Scotland, but was ostracised for his liberal theology.³⁴ He had sustained his Christian faith, and his loyalty to his Church. He expressed the latter through long-running, vigorous debate in which he attempted to demonstrate to his former colleagues that their faith would be better served by a less literal and less dogmatic theology.³⁵

Smith had argued that a fundamental institution of religion was the feast, in which society and its god communed. In feasting together, the collective overcame the individual's existential fear. 'Natural religion' was in part psychic support for the individual's sense of precarious survival amongst supernatural powers. (This idea was not dissimilar from Codrington's *mana*.) Regular ritual feasts sustained clan loyalty and generated emotional and psychic buoyancy.³⁶ 'When men meet their god they feast and are glad together, and whenever they feast and are glad they desire that the god should be of the party,' – thus Robertson Smith described the state of religion until materialism, property regimes, and individualism complicated it.³⁷

Property, and the lack of it, was central to Smith's account. Those religions that had only tenuous bases in territory maintained elements of this 'natural', sanguine communion, he

³³ William Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, 17–19.

³⁴ George W. Stocking, Jr., *After Tylor* (London: Athlone, 1995), 70–74.

³⁵ Robert Ackerman, *James George Frazer: his Life and Work* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), 83.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

argued. Pre-eminently, in Robertson Smith's account, Israel's exiles in Egypt and Babylon produced a vision of a permanent society that had no basis in a particular tract of land. Thus, these people of the book conceived a god, Jehovah, who 'alone was fitted to become the god of the whole earth,' Robertson Smith wrote.³⁸ Elsewhere, the religions of materially progressive societies had succumbed to the tendency to model relations with the divine upon principles of property.³⁹ This materialist tendency also marred the Jewish religion, but they retained enough of the prior, purely communal (and not territorial) conception to support their projection of a god whose righteousness could extend beyond one polity, and in his devotee's ideality, cover the earth. In Chapter Nine, we will study how, from 1931, Elkin similarly built his mature and influential anthropology upon the idea that Aborigines' relations with territory should be considered as separable from, and subordinate to, their cultural continuity.

Elkin, Durkheim, and Marett each followed Smith in seeing totemic societies as exemplifying the religious communion that preceded property. The totemic spirits might correspond to tracts of land, but their significance was spiritual, social, and communal – not territorial. As Elkin put it in 1921, the initiated Aborigine stood towards his totem in a relation of 'awe', and not 'ownership.'⁴⁰ The intellectual corollary of this (and the motive behind Smith's work) was that the historical logic of religion required men of faith to revitalise the impulse of communion, and to free it from the exclusive, property-oriented tendency that had corrupted it during the materialist phase of man's progress. These liberal Christians (and a secular sociologist) all wanted to move faith beyond the crude psychology of exclusive dogma and fear of the supernatural, while returning to the supposed depth of primitive religion, free from the distraction and temptation of property.

But what principles could fill the motivation vacuum once fear, territory, and material interests were sucked out of sociology? Marett attempted to frame an answer by arguing that the human was originally and fundamentally religious, and so only religion offered a path into fullness of humanity. Marett's attempt afforded Elkin his most basic anthropological argument.

Evolutionary perspective: 'The Birth of Humility' as the beginning of history

³⁸ Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, 81

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 395–396.

⁴⁰ Elkin, 'Religion of the Australian Aborigines', 151.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

Marett regarded anthropology as, ultimately, the study of the culmination of one great life-process. ‘Man in evolution’ was his subject.⁴¹ ‘Anthropology is the child of Darwin,’ he wrote; ‘Darwinism made it possible.’ His working hypothesis was ‘that all the forms of life in the world are related together’, and that ‘all evolve.’⁴² He saw history as the attempt to trace man’s evolution ‘*inwards*’: ‘from the necessary and external to the internal and free.’⁴³ In human development, evolution did not imply the extinction or even the supercession of earlier forms. Necessary and external forces continued to shape human life; the psychic structures that evolved when humanity lived almost entirely unconsciously persisted, and conditioned whatever freedom the modern psyche enjoyed.

Before he could become civilized, man survived. Marett began his textbook, *Anthropology* with an epigraph from William James:

Girdled about with the immense darkness of this mysterious universe even as we are, they were born and died, suffered and struggled ... steadfastly serving the profoundest of ideals in their fixed faith that existence in any form is better than non-existence. ... We grow humble and reverent as we contemplate the prodigious spectacle.⁴⁴

James’ pre-historic man was alone in the ‘immense darkness’. His will to persist even as he became conscious of this vertiginous fate was the primary heroism. But what did James mean by calling the basest instinct – survival – humanity’s ‘profoundest ideal’? How was it that a major philosopher of the period could replace conceptions such as the good, the true, and the beautiful – or the *Logos* as love – or a universal primeval spiritual communion – with the notion: ‘exist’? An overview of Marett’s alliance with James will indicate how Marett, at least, answered that question. This enquiry returns us to Marett’s elaboration of *mana* as the raw material of humility and reverence.

Marett integrated the concept of *mana* into the pragmatic turn in psychology and, especially, the psychology of religion. In so doing, he led the science of anthropology out of the straightforward rationalism of its dominant figures (Tylor and Frazer), and emerged as one of the leading thinkers in the field. Against Tylor’s definition of religion as the belief in

⁴¹ RR Marett, *Anthropology* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1911), 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 8–9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 236, 9.

⁴⁴ William James, *Human Immortality*; cited as an epigraph in Marett, *Anthropology*.

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

spirits, Marett proposed, in the last months of the nineteenth century, that religion was at base not a belief at all, but a psychological elaboration from experiences of awe, fear, and wonder.⁴⁵ (In 1921, Elkin reiterated Marett's findings, when he wrote that natural phenomena – from thunder and lightning, to menstrual blood and childbirth – 'called forth questionings' in the Aborigines; questionings that found satisfaction in emotional and social processes, rather than intellectual theories.)⁴⁶

Marett made a similar move against Tylor's successor as anthropology's premier rationalist, James Frazer. Frazer had argued that thought evolved in three stages: first, primitive men attempted to control nature through magic; then, conscious of failure, they retreated into the entreaties, wishes, and self-abasement of religion; finally, scientific man discovered natural laws and established his power over nature. In his 1910 lecture, 'The Birth of Humility', Marett reconsidered Frazer's creative individual experimenting with willpower.⁴⁷ He accepted the hypothesis that religion emerged at a crucial point of failed projection, but where Frazer imagined humiliation and intellectual retreat, Marett suggested humility and moral advance.

Marett used recent developments in psychology. With reference to the experimental psychology of (especially) William James, he produced a formula for religious experience that applied to the whole species of man, across time and space. Marett explained that adrenal and emotional responses to stimuli preceded the formation of ideas. A man charged by a bull first perceived an image, then experienced an adrenal response, and only then entertained an idea such as danger or fear. Developing this psychobiological vein, Marett supposed that the primitive's sense of failure occasionally caused in him the nervous response of neurasthenia, or 'heart-sinking'; but through proto-religious innovation, he and his fellows learned to link that response with its opposite. For nature's mystery also aroused the emotion of awe, an empathetic, imitative response. Marett used the formula '*tabu-mana*' to describe this two-phase physiological theory of the origin of religion. (In his Masters thesis, Elkin adapted it to

⁴⁵ RR Marett, 'Pre-Animistic Religion', a lecture presented to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, September 1899, in *idem*, *The Threshold of Religion* (1909 enlarged 1914; 4th ed., London: Methuen, 1929), 1–28.

⁴⁶ Elkin, 'Religion of the Australian Aborigines', 182.

⁴⁷ R. R. Marett, 'The Birth of Humility' the inaugural lecture as Reader in Soc Anth before the Uni of Oxford, 27th October, 1910, in *idem*, *Threshold of Religion*, 169–202.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

'*ritual-taboo-mana*', because he wanted to emphasize the collective organization of ways to approach that which society recognised as sacred.⁴⁸)

Marett wrote that the result was an asset in society's struggle to fit itself to its environment: 'a mood of chastened striving which, psychologically, will serve better than any system of doctrine as the differentia of genuine religion.'⁴⁹ According to Marett's theory, thus began the religious paradox: man becomes 'good and glad and strong' – a phrase he gleaned from one of Gillen's Arunta informants – by building his social being upon a ritualised submission to ultimately benevolent, awesome powers.

The Primitive Will to Power

Marett's explanation of religious experience had been called forth by a devastating attack upon Christianity. In 1920, Marett published a book in which Aborigines – specifically, the medicine men – manned the front line of his defence against Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Christian psychology. But to appreciate Marett's response to Nietzsche, we have to see how it partnered that of William James, and exploited the proto-sociology of William Robertson Smith. As well as filling in the background to Elkin's anthropology, an appreciation of this broader argument will extend our understanding of the ways in which a University-based Christian Idealism equipped at least this adherent (Elkin) to maintain his commitment to Christian practice, despite formidable challenges. Again, Christian anthropologists provided the lynchpin, by building functional sociology upon the premise of collective and incorporated reverence.

The defence of Christianity was caught up in a reassessment of classical Greece. (Ancient Greece provided Christian fundamentals such as the notion of the *Logos*, and mediated institutional arrangements such as the priestly caste.) We have seen that James Frazer saw religion as a distortion of early man's attempts to master nature. He meant to show that not only early man suffered from self-abasing superstition: it had been, to date, coterminous with civilization. His life work, *The Golden Bough*, began as a study of 'the primitive religion of the Aryans'.⁵⁰ The golden bough was the weapon with which the Greek Priest of Nemi killed his predecessor. Frazer presented the Priest as a general type of

⁴⁸ Elkin, 'Religion of the Australian Aborigines', 151, 160.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵⁰ Robert Ackerman, *James George Frazer: his Life and Work* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), 85.

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

religious authority – both Priest and God. The Priest of Nemi lived in fear of violent death – ‘as the priest who slew the slayer, and shall himself be slain.’⁵¹ Violent religious superstition existed alongside the birth of science, and those parallel lines had continued into his time. But now, Frazer was ‘dragging the guns into position’ for a final assault on propitiatory, fear-based superstition – for so he conceived all religion to be, including Christianity.⁵² Marett, by countering Frazer’s argument with his theory of ‘the birth of humility’, was opposing the iteration within his discipline of a position that was developed in more penetrating form by Nietzsche.

Before Frazer, Nietzsche had similarly based his critique of Christianity upon a reassessment of classical Greece.⁵³ In inventing tragic theatre, Nietzsche had argued, the early ancient Greeks expressed a whole response to life (the politics of which inspired Habermas’ model of the public sphere, we recall from the Introduction.)⁵⁴ These Greeks’ morality was ‘noble’, and not ethical: free men confronted mortality with courage, and magnanimously ruled over the weak. But over time, clever, lesser men, the Priests, countered with a rival morality, which preferred *pathos* and ethics to the catharsis of a full view of human tragedy. They degraded the dramatic vision of fate’s impersonal grandeur, replacing it with a fantasy of a ‘real’ world, in which a justice based on resentment (whence Nietzsche’s key-word ‘*ressentiment*’) would be meted out to the noble rulers. ‘From the very first, Christianity spelled life loathing itself’, Nietzsche argued.⁵⁵ The early ancient Greeks created tragedy before ethics came into the world; since then, only Nietzsche had stepped ‘beyond

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² The attack had a personal dimension: Robertson Smith had led Frazer into the study of primitive religion. Frazer’s biographer writes that Robertson Smith was the best friend Frazer ever had, but the friendship ended when Frazer judged that Robertson Smith had capitulated to the cultural authority of Christianity. After Robertson Smith’s death, Frazer argued that his friend had been firmly anti-Christian.

⁵³ Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘A Critical Backward Glance’, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1886 (1872); New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956, trans. Francis Golffing), 3–17. Golffing (at *ix*) wrote that in this work Nietzsche anticipated what Frazer, Gilbert Murray and Jane Harison were later to establish: the ritual origin of Greek tragedy, as well as the interdependence of myth and ritual in all primitive cultures.’ The alternative is that Nietzsche had read the work of Robertson Smith’s teacher. This second edition begins with a Preface, ‘A Critical Backward Glance’, which Nietzsche wrote as part of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Part IV, ‘Of Greater Men’ (*Übermensch*). It is to this later period of Nietzsche’s thought that James and Marett responded, so I have cited the Preface separately.

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, ‘A Critical Backward Glance’, 7–9.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

good and evil'.⁵⁶ Nietzsche had launched his critique with a monograph entitled *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Marett recognised that Nietzsche's challenge was more fundamental than Frazer's. Marett called his riposte to Frazer 'The Birth of Humility'. His choice of title, and other plays upon Nietzschean phrases, indicated his awareness that his battle against Frazer was part of a war against Nietzsche. We recall Marett's conception of primitive man's physiological struggle with nature, aided by a pseudo-religious psychological mechanism through which he established an empowering relationship with the awesome unknown. Marett argued that religious humility was a proven avenue to the vitalism that Darwinian, post-metaphysical thought seemed to require, and which Nietzsche took to its nihilistic conclusion. Marett took James' 'will to believe' and pitted it against Nietzsche's 'will to power'.

Thus, Elkin was involved in a debate that was conducted on more than one level.⁵⁷ He formed his idea of the long history of ritual and the Priestly role in a milieu that Nietzsche had done much to create. In the years after his MA, when Elkin obtained his PhD within the diffusionist school of anthropology, he furthered the theory of history in which one, historically continuous Priestly caste spread civilization over the world. As we will see, the Nietzschean echoes were strong, and underwent a curious reversal. In a line of thought that depended upon Marett's psychobiology, the Priests became for Elkin the agents of an amoral, pre-ethical vitalism (Ch. 4).

Elkin on Aboriginal religion

In his Masters thesis, Elkin drew upon a wider reach of Aboriginal data than Marett had accessed, and found further evidence for Marett's conclusions. As mentioned, Elkin also corroborated Robertson Smith's speculation that religion was humanity's lifeline to the spiritual communion that preceded property.

We can reduce Elkin's argument to five steps. Firstly, 'religion is an attitude and an experience, rather than an intellectual proposition.'⁵⁸ Secondly, the 'raw material' upon

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁷ Elkin himself referred only to those writers who treated Aboriginal religion, but he cited passages in which Marett responded directly to Nietzsche.

⁵⁸ Elkin, 'Religion of the Australian Aborigines', 3.

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

which that attitude reacted was submission to a higher, awesome power.⁵⁹ In primitive religion, including the Aborigines', that power was best described, following Codrington, as '*mana*': the individual's awe and wonder, roused by the boundless expanse of reality that was unknown, but totemically associated with the intimacy of kin.⁶⁰ Thirdly, religious leaders socialised the experience of submission so that it became 'a feeling of communion with the sacred power of life'. Fourthly, the result of communion was joy and confidence: mystery (as in procreation, for example) and practical uncertainties (food supply) were thus rendered benign.⁶¹ In other words, religious communion was a practical matter, a question of getting help 'in the problem of life', which Elkin glossed as sustaining morale while procuring sex and food.⁶² Fifthly, 'sacredness' – the symbolic means whereby practitioners melded together awe, reverence, communion, and practical co-operation – was a social achievement, and its observance was the fundamental social obligation.⁶³ Thus, religion was the collectively-instituted support for humanity's vital capacity to gain 'an access of moral and social strength' from constraints upon individual desire.⁶⁴

Again like his sources, Elkin emphasized that religion produced vitality. Against Nietzsche's view that religious submission was 'a libel on life', Marett and Elkin each cited the fullness of being they discerned in the Aborigines with the highest religious qualifications, the medicine men.⁶⁵ Elkin wrote that medicine men had extensive training, in law and psychology as well as sleight of hand.⁶⁶ Over twenty years, they endured a series of initiations, increasing in degree of pain, and austerity of abstinence. Yet their demeanour was characteristically cheerful, and they were popular members of the tribe. As men of 'higher degree', they had special freedoms; for example, they were exempt from the rules of sexual morality. Elkin wrote that this licence was rarely if ever exploited.⁶⁷ They had internalised the spirit of the law and could be trusted to restrain themselves. Their superior knowledge and responsibility produced a superior normality.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4. 'There is in religion an object towards which man takes up an attitude of inferiority and dependence and with which he believes he can enter into relation.'

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2, 147–160, 186–192.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 4, 196–197.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 4, 11, 28–29, 39–49, 68.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 5, 193–194.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 4, 49, 195.

⁶⁵ Nietzsche, 'A Critical Backward Glance', 11.

⁶⁶ Elkin, 'Religion of the Australian Aborigines', 155–157.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

In making this argument, Elkin cited passages in which Marett had deployed Aboriginal medicine men as a rebuttal of Nietzsche's argument that religion was life-denying *ressentiment*. 'The primitive will to power is a will for self-mastery for better social service, more stable love and intimacy,' Marett wrote.⁶⁸ In his peroration, Marett extended the Nietzschean reference: he claimed for religious man the mantle of spiritual self-determiner, or *übermensch*: 'The superman is in some sense supersocial. Even when he is in the midst of the congregation he may feel that he walks alone with God.' He values *mana* for its usefulness, Marett continued, but more, 'for what it is in itself, namely, a quickening and enlargement of the spirit. His will for power... is a will for confidence and peace of mind.'⁶⁹ Elkin reiterated Marett's defence of the Christian ethos against the rationalist, Frazer, and the aesthetic vitalist, Nietzsche. In each case, it was the quality of the religious will, its moral and social efficacy, that the Christians defended.

But there was a more recent challenge to Christianity's viability. In following Robertson Smith's argument that religion was based in communion with the entire society and with the society's god, Marett and Elkin found themselves occupying much the same ground as Emile Durkheim. Inspired in large part by Robertson Smith, Durkheim had published an account of the symbiotic origins of religion and man's social self-consciousness.⁷⁰ The master theorist of the evolutionary paradigm of religious scholarship, Durkheim subordinated a merely symbolic God within wider nature by equating Him with human society. The natural development that was human society was, in subjective, religious language, called 'God', Durkheim proposed. Religion (whether called God or some other social *telos*) was necessary error, but error all the same. Society had no end but its own persistence. Science, which perceived this, was objective knowledge with a decreasing margin of error; religion, which denied that purpose ended with society's self-interest, was a subjective set of tactics, evolved to enable individuals to act despite their awareness of how little they knew and how obscure (until now) was the purpose that drove them.⁷¹ Marett seemed almost to agree with Durkheim: he wrote that religion was 'teleopractical': a system

⁶⁸ RR Marett, *Psychology and Folk-lore* (London: Methuen and Co., 1920), 63. Cited in Elkin, 'Religion of the Australian Aborigine', 157.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁷⁰ Émile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 429.

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

of ends to live by.⁷² Then was it nothing more than a traditional mode of ethics? What insight did Aboriginal religion provide Elkin into a Christian faith (more orthodox than Marett's) that God was the ground where volition met objective truth, where faith and reason were one?

A difficult ally: Durkheim on Aboriginal religion

Durkheim fascinated Elkin. The Frenchman had provided – in a rigorously scientific argument, with no hint of apologetics – the most satisfying account of the function of religion that he had read. In many respects, Durkheim's writing fitted Elkin's needs exactly. Durkheim found concrete language in which to express pragmatic Idealism: the centrality of ideals to social existence, and vice versa.⁷³ Durkheim taught that public opinion was sacred. It had two aspects: the motive and means to act, and the approach to truth. In the latter, science must lead religion. This formula exactly expressed the attitude to publicity that Elkin enacted in the early 1930s (Ch. 8).

Moreover, Durkheim formulated the notion of society's symbolic vulnerability that would become central to the functional elements in Elkin's applied psychology (Chs. 6, 7). In a passage Elkin cited, Durkheim wrote that 'social life is only made possible by a vast symbolism. Take away the name and the sign which materialises the unity of the clan, and that unity is in danger of dissolution.'⁷⁴ On these grounds, Elkin came to believe that he understood Aborigines' interests (fundamentally, cultural and symbolic continuity) better than they.

Durkheim also recognised that religion was, literally, vital: a self-conscious organism's response to life.⁷⁵ Most importantly for Elkin, Durkheim understood the existential nature of religion: 'For, above all, a faith is warmth, life, enthusiasm, the exaltation of the whole mental life, the raising of the individual above himself.' And, 'The only source of life at which we can morally reanimate ourselves is that formed by the society of our fellow beings.'⁷⁶ Durkheim understood that faith linked the human organism, its social belonging, and life itself.

⁷² Marett, 'Origin and Validity in Religion', in *Psychology and Folk-lore*, 143–167, at 143.

⁷³ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 418: 'that which makes a man is the totality of the intellectual property which constitutes civilization, and civilization is the work of society.'

⁷⁴ Elkin, 'Religion of the Australian Aborigines', 89.

⁷⁵ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 428.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 416–425, quotation at 425.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

Our psychobiographical account of Elkin's religious formation is pertinent here. As a child, he would have experienced such 'moral reanimation' in exceptionally poignant form after the loss of his parents; but he had repressed the possibility that the succour he found in religion was based only upon social factors (Ch. 2). Thus, we have reason to think that Durkheim's account of an exclusively social and natural origin of faith especially troubled Elkin. As we will see below, and again in Chapter Seven, Elkin's intellectual struggle with Durkheim supports this interpretation.

Durkheim provided a compelling natural hypothesis to explain why religious experience amongst pre-scientific humanity was universal. Durkheim thought that religion was at base the maintenance and elaboration of rituals, which reproduced an original experience of social being. The ritual replication of that experience provided each individual, when he returned to profane life, with a 'second self': the sense of a beyond, upon which he depended, and in which he was fulfilled.

Durkheim claimed that the totemism of the Aborigines had enabled him to prove his case. The people whom ethnographers Spencer, Howitt, and Strehlow described still lived in the kin groups, which, Robertson Smith had argued, produced the original gods. These ethnographers had shown that only collective ritual mattered in Aboriginal religion, Durkheim claimed. Corroborrees transported Aborigines – painted and dancing – into a sacred frenzy. Individuals' experience of daily life in smaller family groups never approached that intensity. And so Aborigines' seminal sense of a 'beyond', associated with a second self, came from their experience of corporate sacredness. Going beyond Robertson Smith, Durkheim found in this second self a kind of real (or objective) creed, a fundamental set of beliefs, unknown to the initiates themselves. Their conscious religion at once elaborated and disguised that mentality:

[E]lementary mythological constructions are secondary products which cover over a system of beliefs, at once simpler and more obscure, vaguer and more essential, which form the solid foundations upon which the religious systems are built. It is this primitive foundation which our analysis of totemism has enabled us to reach.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 202.

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

Durkheim called that ‘primitive foundation’ the ‘totemic principle’ (a label that provided Elkin with a chapter heading in his Masters thesis). The totemic principle was the unity of the tribe and its totem. This unity was not mere alliance, nor was it merely semiotic. The totem was the symbol of the clan, but it also *was* the clan; the totemic reality was the social phenomenon. The totemic principle was the key to Durkheim’s argument, and the target of Elkin’s attempt at rebuttal.

But, in his rebuttal, Elkin seems to have confused Durkheim’s two arguments. In a sublime secondary argument, Durkheim proposed that from ritual had arisen the categories of thought – such as totality, force, space, and time – that ordered society, and made possible ideality. The Aborigine, in his ecstatic, sacred, social ‘second-self’ experienced ‘force’ and ‘totality’ – modes of being utterly unlike his profane consciousness. In a choice of words that triggered Elkin’s Andersonian reflexes, Durkheim described the *conceptual* (as against moral or emotional) effect of the Aborigine’s participation in the totem as ‘impersonality’. He meant by that a category of thought, but Elkin seems to have wrongly interpreted it as a description of Aboriginal religious experience.

Between Durkheim and Marett: Free will, ‘personality’, and social scientific method

Elkin provided three arguments against Durkheim.⁷⁸ In one of them he ventured beyond Marett’s lead.⁷⁹ Writing after several rounds of counter critique with Durkheim, Marett had clarified that the notion of *mana* was at best ambivalently connected – as was much advanced religion (including Marett’s own) – with the conception that any ‘personality’ inhered in the divine power.⁸⁰ Marett was too circumspect, and too empirically minded, ever to make a bald

⁷⁸ Firstly, Marett countered Durkheim by arguing that individual religious experience was original and fundamental, and that its social elaboration was secondary. First, the individual responded to nature in various ways; then he learned to co-ordinate his responses to at once constrain and bolster his will; then with his fellows he developed rites that socialised the technique. As we have seen, Elkin adopted this argument and labelled it the ‘*mana-tabu-ritual*’ formula. Like Marett, he used it to refute Durkheim. Secondly, again like Marett, Elkin argued that Durkheim had drawn too strong a conclusion from the evidence. The scientific mind was tempted by a single cause, Marett wrote, but when speculating he must ‘keep it loose’, and accommodate all sensible possibilities. (Marett and Durkheim exchanged rounds of counter-critique on this point, see *Elementary Forms* 201 and Elkin wrote that Durkheim’s theory ‘is not to be accepted just because of its unity and smoothness.’ Elkin, ‘Religion of the Australian Aborigines’, 189.

⁷⁹ The other was similar: Elkin preferred Robertson Smith’s argument that religion was intrinsically moral to Marett’s distinction of the religious capacity from its moral exercise. We return to this below.

⁸⁰ Marett, ‘The Conception of Mana’, in *The Threshold of Religion*, 99–121, at 120–121. Marett rebutted Durkheim’s claim that *all* religious experience was socially generated, but he was content to treat as ‘Social Psychology’ most of the religious field.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

statement of his religious beliefs. But his writings suggest that he equated the divine mystery with life itself, and participated in religion as a collective, historically continuous effort to unite vital impulses with moral ideals. Good politics produced a secure polity; good economics produced prosperity; good religion produced grace and personal strength, so long as you, like an Arunta tribesman, had ‘the decency and the sound sense to ascribe your good fortune, not to yourself, but to the higher powers that are with and in you, yet are never merely you.’⁸¹ Such was Marett’s ‘teleopractical’ religion.

But at this stage, in his early thirties, Elkin was not so detached. Both Marett, through a thorough-going agnosticism, and Durkheim, by virtue of his positivism, achieved a distanced empathy in their religious speculation. In contrast, Elkin sought personal vindication in his exposition of Aboriginal religion. From the year Elkin wrote his Masters thesis, according to his biographer, his psychosomatic illness ended.⁸² His uneasy compliance with Anglicanism did not transform into a Marettian, religious sophistication; in particular, he did not follow Marett in ceding the possibility that religion’s existential effects were only *socially* (and not supernaturally, or at least mystically) related to personal or psychological results. Nor did he experience a complete conversion to Durkheim’s view of religion, in which science sought to supplant it so far as was practicable. Instead, by unwittingly misrepresenting each of their versions of religious experience, he convinced himself that he had at last justified his belief in a personal God. (A decade later he found less personal and surer foundations for a religious settlement (Ch. 7).)

Elkin found in Aborigines’ experience an example with which he buttressed the greater part of religion as he practised it. The crucial point was whether as a priest he could lead in good faith appeals to a divine power conceived as responsive to the human will. From Marett’s writings, we may conclude that Marett indulged in the ritual of prayer as a kind of theatrical self- and group-suggestion. In contrast, Elkin made special efforts to discover in Aborigines’ religious experience a sense of a supernatural personality – a free, conscious will that existed independently of the individual or society. His problem was that Durkheim had already accounted for a sense of transcendent ‘moral authority’: it arose from the individual’s awareness of his total dependence upon society: for a sustainable means of subsistence, for

⁸¹ Marett, ‘Magic or Religion’, in *idem, Psychology and Folk-lore*, 168–195, at 194.

⁸² Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 36–37.

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

language, for all of life's higher satisfactions. How did God differ from or exceed primitive man's unconscious sense of his dependence upon society?

In trying to answer this question, Elkin knew he was on dangerous ground. He began his thesis by noting his interest in 'the religious problem'.

Is there a religion, a supernatural, a God-environment? Or has man all down the ages, been taking up the religious attitude to a mere figment of his imagination? ... Is there really a Being or Power whom we can call God who has been guiding and revealing himself to man? Is *mana* and his consciousness a window through which something of reality, of God, is made manifest in space and time? ... In other words; – Is the God-idea founded on a real experience of a God? Or is matter, or psychical and social powers, the ultimate?⁸³

He hastened to add that he would not attempt to answer the question: not history of religion but 'psychology and metaphysics must take up the quest.' He proposed to use a historical perspective merely 'to describe, externally, what religion is'. But in practice that distinction broke down: yes, religion is an experience, but of what?

In conceiving the object of Aborigine's religious experience, Elkin unwittingly slid between the impersonal notion of 'Power' and a personal notion of 'a Being', 'God'. In his introductory delimitation of intent, quoted last paragraph, Elkin wrote as if they were the same thing, and the 'ultimate question' was, did It exist? But Durkheim had shown, and none had doubted, that a mysterious, transpersonal 'Power' existed: society itself. On what basis did Elkin extend the notion of the divine so that it had a personal aspect?

Elkin insisted, as if he were making a crucial point, that Aborigines experienced a 'quasi-personal' relation with *Mana*. According to Elkin, that relationship involved humility. This attitude marked 'an affair between wills' – Marett's 'birth of humility'. 'It is in the act of the will, however expressed, that the centre of the magical action lies,' Elkin wrote.⁸⁴ When the Aborigine invoked *mana*, he was 'really bringing into play by his own projective act of will another mystic force.'⁸⁵ Thus, for Elkin, *mana* was one 'mystic force', with which the Aborigine connected via another, his will. Humility opened to the Aborigines a sacred communion of wills. By re-iterating the 'quasi-personal' nature of this communion, Elkin differentiated it from the 'impersonal' conception of *mana* originated by Codrington,

⁸³ Elkin, 'Religion of the Australian Aborigines', 2.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

developed by Marett, and pre-empted in Durkheim by the impersonal totemic principle. However, Elkin based his alternative to Marett upon a misreading of Marett's ideas.

In a first attempt to argue against Frazer's theory that religion resulted from the failure of magic, Marett had argued that the anthropologist could not assume any clear separation of religion from magic. This argument came several years before 'The Birth of Humility', and Marett had not yet discovered how to show that religion was a *positive* alternative to magic. He sought merely to demonstrate a continuum 'From Spell to Prayer' by showing how a 'projective act of the will' could involve different attitudes of desire, resulting in a mode of self-suggestion that imagined another power was doing the suggesting. But this argument dragged religion down to the level of magic. Marett's later theory, concerning the birth of humility, we recall, elevated religion such that it responded to nature by combining wonder, fear, submission, and catharsis. His fuller primitive religious psychology articulated with Robertson Smith's fundamental institution of communion: in awe, humility, and reverence, Marett synthesised, society came together and communed with the divine. But Marett's earlier idea of a 'projective act of the will' afforded no such positive development. Marett dropped it, but for the reasons outlined above, Elkin picked it up.

Not surprisingly, then, Elkin's claim (that Aborigines experienced a 'quasi-personal' divine power) remained wavering and unsteady. His writing suggests that he refused to see it clearly. Seemingly at random, when describing the power with which Aborigines came into contact, he moved between the pronouns 'which' and 'who':

Where there is belief in the presence of [the power that makes men] with *whom* men can come into communion, though the sacramental methods be crude, there is religion.⁸⁶

What matters is, that the actors feel themselves in touch with an influence or force, *which* is even sometimes conceived in a quasi-personal way, but which they do not treat as a mechanical power.⁸⁷

He has a conception of the stuff of which religion is made, for he has an experience of a mysterious power on which he feels in some way dependent for life, and with *which* he can come into communion, and as a result face life steadily. And that surely is the function of religion.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

Concerning the personality of the sacred, he kept his linguistic options open.

Elkin concluded as if he had resolved his ambivalence about the personality of the sacred power. He began his peroration with a statement, which closely resembled Marett's, concerning the breadth of the Aboriginal idea of the divine:

Primitive religion cannot be confined to the 'God-idea', unless this be very liberally interpreted. We could rather speak of a 'god-stuff' or 'mana', and to the whole religious field, of whatever elements it consists give the name of 'the sacred'.⁸⁹

But in fact, for an Aboriginal 'God-idea' (outside of regions probably influenced by white settlement), Elkin had found only the vague and unconvincing evidence of a 'quasi-personal' prayer. Nevertheless, he confidently concluded with reference to the personality of the aboriginal divine:

In the course of evolution, man appears to have come into the possession of a consciousness which enabled him to realise gradually the presence of a power with both immanent and transcendent aspects, who is the creator and life-giver, with whom he can come into communion; and who is the ultimate source of moral and social strength.⁹⁰

Thus, Elkin claimed to have shown that Durkheim's socially sealed structuralism was wrong. The young Elkin insisted that religion looked beyond nature, and beyond society.

His claim was brittle. Elkin felt compelled to refute Durkheim's argument from collective effervescence which threatened his own religious experience and rationale. In so doing, he demonstrated that he had only half-learned the lessons that Marett drew from 'the birth of humility'. Marett's lessons are well illustrated by comparing Durkheim and Marett's responses one to another. We will see how Marett developed a social scientific agnosticism that complemented his Anglican commitment – and how in contrast the young Elkin's 'irritable' (to hark back to Keats (Ch. 2)) attempt to resolve metaphysical issues with some finality undermined the very rituals that he sought to support.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 196–197.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

The agnostic vs. the positivist

Durkheim argued that Marett's work was methodologically unsatisfying. Marett did not attempt a systematic explanation of primitive religion; he left open the relation between impersonal *mana* and other religious modes, Durkheim complained.

Marett did not go so far as to maintain that always and in every case the idea of a spirit is logically and chronologically posterior to that of *mana* and is derived from it; he even seemed disposed to admit that it has sometimes appeared independently and consequently, that religious thought flows from a double source.⁹¹

Methodologically, Marett's work was 'hesitating and very reserved', criticised Durkheim.

In response, Marett argued that caution was preferable to the Frenchman's strong claims.⁹² 'I have "kept it loose", as artists are advised to do when giving first shape to a picture,' he replied.⁹³ Durkheim, in contrast, had claimed too much. 'A monograph on Australian totemism is one thing; the determination of a type of human religion is another thing.'⁹⁴ Marett added that when dealing with something as complex as religion, allowing the possibility of multiple origins was the sensible approach.

Marett's methodological argument went deeper than any difference over data and interpretation.

The sociological school of Durkheim ... combines a genuine psychological interest with the gratuitous postulate of determinism, a position which leads them, in their quest for objectivity, to abstract away, and hence in effect to ignore and undervalue, that free moment in human history of which individuality is the expression; whereas, as concretely presented, and hence for the purposes of science as distinct from metaphysics, human experience exhibits the contradictory appearances of determination and freedom in conjunction.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Durkheim *Elementary Forms*, 201.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 287n. Marett responded in his 'Introduction' to *Threshold of Religion*, at xxiii. 'as regards method, while my general attitude is that of an anthropologist, my special interest is psychological. I approach the history of religion as a student of Man in evolution'; and at xiv: 'Science must proceed, as Bacon says, *continenter et gradatim*.'

⁹³ Marett, 'Introduction', xxix.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* xxvii.

⁹⁵ RR Marett, 'A Sociological View of Comparative Religion', in *idem*, *The Threshold of Religion* (1909 enlarged 1914; 4th ed., London: Methuen, 1929) 122–144, at 122–23. (*Sociological Review*, Jan 1908, 48–60.)

3. Anthropology and the function of humility

In psychology, Marett argued, we will stay closer to the truth by admitting the full texture of our own experience, than by following bold and far-reaching intellectual constructs into experiences that defy our sympathy.

Marett did not think that a scientific solution to the problem of religious communion, or the problem of the religious paradox, was worth having, that is, he did not perceive the religious problem as one properly susceptible to mastery or to solution. The religious end was infinitely receding. Marett's religious 'superman', who '[e]ven when he is in the midst of the congregation ... may feel that he walks alone with God', was always ready to fulfill the moral norm supported by the present conditions of communion, by aspiring to a higher intuition, or to a new inter-social challenge. Marett argued that this continual process of moral becoming was the meaning of rule by 'the people' – that uncontainable aspiration – as against theocracy or technocracy. The 'democratic spirit', he wrote, was

a spirit of toleration such as enables outworn conventions to be constantly renewed without rupture of the social tie. Hence democracy is hateful to a certain type of philosopher. It smacks of the infinite, that bugbear of the tidy-minded. It cannot be reduced to an idea; its content is a discontent, which is divine only for those who seek God in the indefinable.⁹⁶

Idealist morality was unceasing, and incompatible with the idea that a scientist could master its social machinery.

Likewise, Marett quite deliberately left in abeyance the question of the personality of God. He knew the conundrum that confronted the Idealist philosophers, led by Bernard Bosanquet, who succeeded Green. They found that the idea of an Absolute personality was inconsistent with the idea of a free, self-directed moral project.⁹⁷ If will and moral agency were conceived as already perfected in any form, then the human will became (as for Durkheim) merely a matter of adjustments within a domain of necessity. Thus when Elkin sought the psychic security of a transcendent, supernatural personality, who supported the hopes of the spiritual agent, he unwittingly sought refuge in an amoral, deterministic logic much like Durkheim's positivism. Accordingly, we will see in following chapters how the young Elkin's understanding of religion as a kind of evolutionary vitalism (religion as

⁹⁶ Marett, *Psychology and Folk-lore*, 58.

⁹⁷ Richter, *Politics of Conscience*, 186–187.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

empowering contact with an ultimate reality which fitted the society for survival) threatened to over-ride moral Idealism (and its end of deepening, widening communion). We will trace this development in the following chapter, and later we will see how Elkin replaced the metaphysical idea of a personal absolute with the Christian symbol of a divine man (Ch. 7).

Conclusion and prospect

Elkin's insecurity about 'personality' expressed his oscillation between science and religion. The same dynamic put Elkin uneasily astride two models of scholarship. Durkheim sought knowledge about society as an end in itself, confident that positive knowledge would feed back into a more effective and humane morality. For the positivist, society was a thing to be known. In contrast, the Christian Idealists (Marett following James, also Anderson and Burgmann) sought ways of knowing that fulfilled a particular attitude towards the unknowable. For the Idealist, society was relationship, and so was itself a way of knowing. In the poem Elkin invoked introducing his Masters thesis, Tennyson concentrated the contrast between these kinds of knowledge:

Here about the beach I wander'd, nourishing a youth sublime
With the fairy tales of science, and the long result of Time.

The 'long result of time' – including organic, embodied, habituated human lives – could only be partially known by the intellect. That quotient of knowledge rested upon 'methodological fictions' (Marett), or 'the fairy tales of science' (Tennyson), such as the idea that society itself possessed agency, and could be managed.

Positivism sought mastery; religion sought right relation, and communion. Obviously, the ideal community of enquiry would combine these ways of being and knowing. But the intellectual trend was all one way: science was on the rise, and liberal religion faltering. At least, this was Elkin's experience when he journeyed to the metropolis to gain a yet higher degree, whence we follow him next chapter. Prediction based on the data of positivist science seemed credible; and purpose, based on faith in the tradition of a sublime (even if 'all too human') personality, mere sentiment.